

House Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade and Consumer Protection
The Honorable Bobby Rush, Chairman
September 25, 2007, 10 AM

Remarks of Dr. E. Faye Williams, Esq., National Chair
National Congress of Black Women
On Behalf Of The
Women's Coalition on Dignity and Diversity

**“FROM IMUS TO INDUSTRY: THE BUSINESS OF STEREOTYPES AND
DEGRADING IMAGES”**

SUMMARY

- The *Women's Coalition on Dignity and Diversity* represents more than 11 million women and their families.
- Women, especially Black women and our children, have been bombarded with misogyny, violence and obscenity through public airwaves.
- Many corporate leaders in the entertainment business have captured the rawness of the feelings of many Black males and lured them into changing what began as a positive expression of our culture to something negative for the sake of the almighty dollar.
- The Jena 6 case says to young people they have reason to be angry with everybody—even with Black women and Black elders who've given their all to make life better for them.
- Instead of putting adequate funds into the education of young people, and the assurance of jobs and opportunities for them to build their own businesses, our system has failed them by instead steadily pouring money into war and destruction.
- We must provide the kinds of options that would prevent young people from idolizing the lives of thugs, pimps and other negative images.
- Too many of us have criticized young people for denigrating and disrespecting women and Black people to make a living when they are offered no decent options for making a living.
- We have allowed greedy corporate executives in the entertainment industry to lead too many of our young people to believe that is okay to entertain themselves by destroying Black culture
- The profanity, vulgarity, and obscenity have become common place. Even our very young babies have become subjected to horrifying language and images on public airwaves by those who should know better, but are claiming that this is the only way to relate to our children. If you haven't seen the so-called public service advertisement called *Read a Book* that looks like just another cartoon, you need to see it to understand what I am talking about.
- Our complaint is not about freedom of speech; we're for that. It's about much needed responsibility and sensitivity in the use of free speech.
- Black women are under greater attack than anyone else—and it's getting worse.
- Not only entertainment executives, but advertisers must act more responsibly in what they pay to sponsor on public airwaves.
- There must be consequences for those who insist upon subjecting our children to songs like *Read a Book*—the bizarre so called *public service advertisement*.
- We need help from Congress with ridding the public airwaves of extreme obscenity and denigration of women and their families.

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Chairman Rush and Members of the Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade and Consumer Protection, on behalf of the *Women's Coalition on Dignity and Diversity*, representing more than 11 million women and their families, we thank you for holding this hearing.

Our coalition is made up of diverse groups of women from numerous organizations—such as the *National Council of Negro Women*, *Rainbow-PUSH*, *National Action Network*, *National Organization for Women*, *Feminist Majority*, the *YWCA*, the *National Coalition on Black Civic Participation*, the *National Congress of Black Women*, as well as women in sports, religion, labor, business and all walks of life.

Mr. Chairman, we women, especially we Black women and our children, have been bombarded with misogyny, violence and obscenity through public airwaves day after day. In a society that claims that it is fair and seeks justice for all, too many corporate leaders in the entertainment business have captured the rawness of the feelings of many Black males, and a few Black females, who feel disenfranchised. Some rap music which began with a positive purpose, now taps into the psyche of Black teens who have a sense that no one cares that young Black males are routinely getting the short end of the stick in America. They look at what is happening in the Jena 6 case in my home state, Louisiana, and they have

reason to believe they should be angry with everybody—even with Black women and Black elders who've given their all to try to make life better for them.

Instead of putting adequate funds into the education and care of young people, and the assurance of jobs and a chance to build their own businesses, our system has failed them by steadily diverting funds into war and destruction. We have not always provided the kinds of options that would prevent our young people from idolizing the lives of thugs, pimps, warlords or other negative images. Too many of us have criticized young people for denigrating and disrespecting women and Black people in order to make a living, when they are offered no decent options.

We have allowed greedy corporate executives—especially those in the entertainment industry-- to lead many of our young people to believe that is okay to entertain themselves by destroying the culture of our people. We know all too well what happened to our Native American brothers and sisters in movies through the years. The profanity, vulgarity, and obscenity we see and hear today have become common place to the point of being genocidal.

Even our very young babies have become subjected to horrifying language and images on public airwaves by those who should know better, but are claiming that this is the only way to relate to our children. If you haven't seen the so-called public service advertisement that looks like just another cartoon, called *Read a Book*, you need to see it to understand what I am talking about. What are teachers to do when they hear these children repeat these words?

Why should our children be assaulted daily with garbage under the guise of First amendment rights that say nothing about responsibility?

The corporate executives that lure our young people into believing it is all right to destroy the culture of a people seem to have targeted Black women and our families who've contributed so much to this nation. The same can be said historically about our Native American sisters and their families.

We believe in freedom of speech, but with every right goes responsibility. We have a right to earn money, but we have a corresponding responsibility to pay income taxes.

We have a right to travel on public transportation such as airplanes, but a responsibility not to carry on or even mention guns or other weapons while riding. We have a right to have children, but a responsibility not to abuse or neglect them.

Mr. Chairman, using the public airwaves may be a right, but the line must be drawn and balanced by the responsibility to refrain from painting an immoral image of an entire race of people—and of Black women in particular. Not only entertainment executives, but advertisers must act more responsibly. Why should we want to buy a product that pays for our destruction?

Mr. Chairman, those who use the public airwaves must be made to understand that there are consequences for those who insist upon subjecting our children to songs like *Read a Book*. The words are too bizarre to mention in this hearing, but it's easy enough to hear them on the Internet or on television.

When you see the video and hear the words, you will understand why we are so highly disturbed about what is brought to our children-- while those who bring it castigate those of us who object to it. We all

want our children to read a book, but our children are not so dumb that they need to be told in such vile and bizarre language to do so.

Along with the right of freedom of speech goes the responsibility not to bombard those airwaves with filthy, derogatory, offensive, indecent language that crosses the line of decency and shocks the conscience of all who hear or see it. We're not objecting to what goes on in adult clubs here; we're talking about what is brought to our children who deserve better images.

Nearly 15 years ago, my predecessor, the late Dr. C. DeLores Tucker, warned us about where we were headed when we allow unrestricted rights to spew vicious, hateful words about women, and how this contributes to violence and disrespect. The results have come to pass.

On occasion, we turn our televisions on and we are embarrassed and humiliated to see so many Black men and women portrayed as gangsters, pimps, prostitutes, and thugs—with no mention of the great works of our people—no balance what-so-ever.

What we so often see on television, videos and elsewhere is not the culture of the people I know. It's not the culture of the majority of Black people. Our culture has more to do with respecting our elders, our sisters, our mothers and grandmothers—but where are those images? In our culture, the gangster is the exception; the thug is the exception; the pimp is the exception; the prostitute is the exception. Many Black men and women serve this country with honor and distinction, and deserve better treatment.

Black women have served this country as Surgeon General, Secretary of Labor, Energy, Housing and Urban Development, Secretary of State, in Congress, as Diplomats, as college Presidents, in law, medicine and all walks of life—and too rarely do we even hear many of our public officials speak out

about balancing rights with responsibilities when it comes to the images portrayed of Black women and our families on public airwaves.

Don Imus was wrong when he belittled the young women at Rutgers. Courtland Milloy of the *Washington Post* is usually right on the issues, but he just plain got it wrong when he belittled our efforts to demand better images of women and our families in our “Enough is Enough” campaign. Isiah Thomas is wrong when he says that it’s highly offensive for a white male to call a Black female a bitch, but it’s okay for a Black man to do so. Well, Mr. Thomas would be surprised to know that they’re equally offensive and totally unacceptable to Black women.

Chairman Rush, we in the *Women’s Coalition for Dignity and Diversity* respect the First Amendment rights of every citizen. We believe in the right to free speech, but we also believe in decent speech.

Yes, rights without responsibilities should be labeled anarchy; yet that is much of what we see and hear on our public airwaves. It’s time for Congress to stand up and insist upon responsibility, and make it clear to the FCC and the FTC what their roles should be in making it happen. That is what we in the *Women’s Coalition for Dignity and Diversity* are saying.

We can’t, and we won’t, sit around and wait for *gangsta rap* and other vicious media images of us to self destruct. We’re not just talking about BET, and its parent company, Viacom, about bombardment of our community with vicious images of women and of Black people. We call upon all media to be more responsible. We also call upon advertisers to be more sensitive to the pain these negative images cause those of us being targeted.

I conclude by repeating what President Lyndon Johnson once said, “How incredible it is that in this fragile existence we should hate and destroy one another!”, and I say that without responsibility, that is exactly what happens to women and our families each time someone decides to denigrate us on public airwaves for the almighty dollar, and in the name of free speech.

Being credited with, or being blamed for, the diminishing sales of *gangsta rap* and offensive language and images is a banner we proudly wear; but it’s not happening because we *allowed* it to self destruct. It’s happening because we’ve been intent upon making it happen for years— at least since the *National Congress of Black Women* began our campaign nearly 15 years ago, with others joining us recently.

We have a long way to go, Mr. Chairman, and we still need your help. We need Mr. Markey’s help and the help of every Member of this Subcommittee and the Committee on Energy and Commerce to rein in what should and what should not be seen or said so freely on public airwaves.

We need the Progressives, Conservatives, Democrats, Republicans, Independents, and all others to talk not just about rights of free speech, but also about the responsibilities inherent in this great freedom. Again, we thank you for your courage in holding these hearings.